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THE PRIME MINISTER

4 December 1981

Dear Mr. Summerson,

Thank you for your letter forwarding one dated 12 November from your colleague, Madge Nichols, on the paying off of HMS Endurance, the Royal Navy Ice Patrol Ship. HMS Endurance, like HMS Protector before her, has been a familiar sight in the South Atlantic and Antarctic for many years and her annual deployments have enabled her to perform a number of useful functions. It would be surprising, therefore, if the news that she is planned to be withdrawn from service in 1982 on her return from her next deployment had not met with some disappointment. I thought you might find it helpful if I were to go into the matter in some detail as well as to correct apparent misunderstandings.

I must make one thing clear from the start. This Government has no intention of reneging on its responsibilities towards the Falkland Islands. We are in no doubt as to the legitimacy of our Sovereignty over the Islands and are determined to see that this is upheld. It is important, however, not to over-estimate Endurance's role both actual and potential, in defence of our national interests. She is not essential to the maintenance of our defence commitment to the Falkland Islands, of which the Royal Marines Garrison provides - and will continue to provide - a tangible and constant demonstration. I accept that the presence of HMS Endurance in the region for some 6 months of the year helps to underline our commitment to the defence of the Falkland Islands. But in re-appraising the future Defence programme, in order to ensure that the several roles that our forces undertake are carried out to best and most economic effect, the Government

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had to take some hard decisions, including the paying off of a carrier, two assault ships and a number of destroyers and frigates. Against this background, we had reluctantly to conclude that HMS Endurance's continued operation can no longer be justified.

Mrs. Nichols suggests that we are failing the Falkland Islanders in not developing the economic potential of the offshore resources. The fact is that the dispute with Argentina over sovereignty inevitably has an adverse effect on the Islands' economy. Off-shore oil exploration is a case in point. Neither we nor anyone else can confirm the presence or absence of oil there because the dispute prevents any drilling. We wish to overcome our difficulties with Argentina and to enable the Islanders to enjoy a secure and prosperous future under the administration of their choice. That is why successive Governments have held talks with the Argentines and why we hope to continue to do so. But I must emphasise that the wishes of the Islanders are paramount. I should also point out that over recent years the Islands have received more aid per head per annum from the UK than any other recipient of British aid. Finally, the majority of the recommendations in the 1976 Report into the Islands' economy by Lord Shackleton have been carried out.

It is true that Endurance also plays a useful role in Antarctica, where she conducts hydrographic and oceanographic surveys which assist the work of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS). It is misleading to suggest that she is the only ship equipped for service in the ice. The BAS operates its own ships in Antarctica and the role and work of the BAS can be sustained without the presence of Endurance. Nor is it the case that Endurance was solely responsible for the discovery of mineral deposits in British Graham Land. In fact none has yet been located with certainty. But it is true that the ship has assisted the BAS in their geological work: for example, last year she stood by in support of a BAS team on James Ross Island.

A number of countries are signatories to the Antarctic Treaty and, like us, lay claim to sovereignty over certain areas of Antarctica. It is in an avowed attempt to avoid the risk of military conflict in defence of such claims and so to provide for



the continued demilitarisation of the region that all the Treaty partners hope shortly to begin negotiating a regime for exploiting the mineral resources of the area, within the framework of the Treaty itself. It is in our best interests that exploitation should proceed on an agreed basis rather than for individual countries to press their separate claims and so risk a breakdown of cooperation.

No decision has been taken on the eventual disposal of Endurance following her withdrawal from service in Spring next year. I can fully understand that her planned paying off will have had some effect on morale; this is inevitable when any ship with a proud record is on her last commission. The decision on HMS Endurance was not taken lightly, and I hope that what I have said will help to put the decision in perspective. I hope that I have also been able to indicate our determination both to see to it that the interests of the Falkland Islanders continue to be upheld and to ensure that our important economic interests in Antarctica are successfully pursued.

Yours sincerely  
R. E. G. Simmerson

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